Throne of Blood

Jan Lavrinovski

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Saigon

The fan creaked with every rotation, blades lazily chopping the hot air, stirring up only the smell of piss, mildew, and something rotting behind the wall. The ceiling was cracked in three corners. Brown stains from the monsoon months bled down like the last gasps of forgotten men. Jack Braddock lay on the bed with his boots on, shirt half-buttoned, bare chest glistening with sweat. The mattress underneath him was damp — whether from the air or from him, it didn't matter. Nothing dried in Saigon. Not wounds, not clothes, not men. He reached for the glass on the side table, knocked over a bottle of cheap rice whisky, caught it mid-fall with the reflex of someone who used to care. The drink burned down his throat and into the pit that never stayed full.

Outside the window, if you could call the jagged rectangle in the wall a window, was the city's cancerous sprawl. Tin roofs, crumbling French walls, alleys bloated with steam and motorbike fumes. The hotel — though it didn't deserve the word — stood three stories above the slaughterhouse district, tucked behind a laundry shack and an opium den that never closed. The air reeked of old cooking oil and iron. The neon sign flickered above the entrance in pale orange Vietnamese script that meant nothing to him. He'd never asked what the place was called.

On the floor beside the broken fan, three lines of coke rested on a shard of mirror. The powder stuck in the humidity, curling at the edges like drying blood. He bent forward with a rolled-up 100 dong note and inhaled deeply. His head snapped back, eyes closed, a sharp exhale from his nose, then a low grunt like something stirring awake in him. "Jesus fuck," he muttered, slumping back onto the bed.

A whirling flash of rotors passed through his mind — blades beating over jungle treetops, screaming. Then the scent: gasoline, burning flesh, napalm eating a man's skin alive while he crawled without a face. He heard the slow-motion thud of explosions, bodies turning inside out, children running with hair on fire, then nothing but static. Braddock's eyes twitched open. He grabbed the corner of the table and slammed it against the wall, legs snapping, the drawer spilling old cigarette butts and army-issue letters stained with drink. "Shut up," he whispered to the room. "Shut the fuck up."

He sat there breathing through his teeth, jaw clenched. Sweat trickled down the bridge of his nose and into the cracked lines around his mouth. He reached for the bottle again, found the cap gone, drank. Then he lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, the match flaring too close to his face. The fan spun above, indifferent. Somewhere down the hall, a woman screamed and laughed in the same breath. Downstairs, someone was playing a scratched tape of Sam Cooke. The music warped through the walls like a voice from underwater.

Braddock smoked halfway through the cigarette before the filter burned his fingers. Then he lay back, arms out, staring at the ceiling like he expected it to open and swallow him. The shadows there looked like wings. “I was clean,” he murmured. “Goddamn it, I was.” He let the bottle slide from his hand onto the bed. His eyes shut. He didn’t move again. Only the fan kept spinning.

He woke with his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth and a hammering behind his eyes that pulsed in time with the fan. The room smelled worse in daylight. Sour liquor, old smoke, damp cloth, and the copper edge of dried blood from his split knuckle. Braddock rolled onto his side and retched onto the floor, bile splashing against the cracked tiles near the bed. It came up in thin, burning waves that left him gagging, forehead pressed to the mattress, breath coming shallow through his nose. “Christ,” he whispered, the word breaking apart in his mouth.

He pushed himself upright and fumbled for a cigarette with hands that shook just enough to piss him off. The lighter sparked twice before the flame caught. Smoke filled his lungs and settled them. He dragged slow and deep, eyes half-closed, then stood and staggered toward the sink. The mirror above it was spider-webbed with cracks, his face split into fragments: one eye swollen and red, another sunken and yellowed, sweat crusted along his hairline. He turned the tap. Rusty water coughed out, brown at first, then thin and clear enough to use. He splashed his face again and again, palms scraping over stubble, water dripping from his chin onto the stained porcelain. “You’re still here,” he told the man in the mirror. The man didn’t answer.

A helicopter passed low outside, the sound sliding under his skin. His jaw tightened. For a moment the sink wasn’t a sink anymore but the lip of a crater, and the water was burning fuel. He leaned harder into the porcelain until it creaked. The cigarette fell from his mouth into the basin, hissing. He watched it drown.

There was a knock at the door. Firm. Controlled. Not the knock of a drunk or a hooker. Another knock followed, closer together this time. Braddock stayed where he was, hands braced on the sink, water still running. “Go away,” he said, quietly, to no one in particular. The knock came again. He shut off the tap and wiped his face on his sleeve. His head throbbed as he crossed the room.

He opened the door a hand’s width. Two men stood in the hallway, clean uniforms, eyes flat, posture exact. One was older, gray at the temples. The other had a clipboard tucked under his arm like a shield. The corridor behind them smelled of bleach and boiled cabbage. “Captain Jack Braddock?” the older one said. Braddock nodded once. “You’re requested to come with us, sir.” No explanation followed. No hint of apology.

Braddock looked past them, down the hall, at the flickering light near the stairwell. He scratched at the dried blood on his knuckle. “What did I do?” he asked. The younger man

shifted his weight but said nothing. The older one met Braddock's eyes and held them. "There are no charges," he said. "You've got orders."

Braddock exhaled smoke through his nose and nodded again. "Let me get my boots." He shut the door without waiting for a response and leaned against it for a moment, eyes closed. "A mission," he thought. "So that's how it starts." He pulled on his boots, crushed the cigarette under his heel, and exited the door. The fan kept turning behind him, stirring the heat, as they led him away.

The room smelled of stale paper and machine oil. Fluorescent lights buzzed above, casting the whole place in a greenish tint like the bottom of an aquarium. A box fan in the corner rattled and pushed cold air against Braddock's neck. The chair he sat in was metal, bolted to the floor, and every time he shifted it made a dry scraping noise. His hands rested on the table, fingers twitching slightly from whatever cocktail of alcohol, nerves, and leftover cocaine still boiled in his blood. Across from him sat three men in identical uniforms, collars tight, top buttons closed, sweatless. One smoked. Another shuffled folders. The third just stared.

The projector whirred to life with a cough, the reel catching. On the screen: a young officer in dress greens, smiling, shaking hands with brass. Colonel Nathaniel Kane. Commendation ceremony, somewhere in Da Nang. No sound. The film was scratched and grainy. "That's him in '66," said the one with the cigarette. "Silver Star. Ran recon out past the DMZ. Men loved him. Word is the locals built him shrines."

Another cut — Kane training Montagnard tribesmen, drawing lines in the dirt with a stick, laughing. The next shot: bodies piled outside a burned village. Another reel — Kane speaking at a press conference, eyes brighter than the rest of him, words lost in silence, but his mouth moved like he was talking about something holy. Then the film stuttered and shifted.

Now the images came darker. Harsher cuts. A body hanging upside down from a tree. American, uniform still half intact. Another shot: Kane, older now, shirtless in jungle fatigues, crouching beside a riverbank altar made of skulls. He was staring at something, but his face gave nothing away.

The film went black. The officer hit the lights.

"We lost contact with his unit fourteen months ago," said the man with the folders. "We assumed the jungle swallowed him. Then we started getting intercepted transmissions. Voice recordings. Scribbled radio code from our own recon teams. First they said he was dead. Then they said he was a god."

Braddock blinked hard. The cold of the room was settling into his spine. His arms were crossed now. He hadn't even noticed. The man across from him slid a manila folder toward him. "Read this. Don't say anything out loud. You can keep it until the mission's over."

Inside: black-and-white stills of mutilated bodies, field notes, maps marked with ink circles. At the bottom: a letter. Handwritten. In neat, slanted script.

"They are not savages. They are cleaner than us. They understand purity. I have learned the only cure for chaos is perfect will. Horror is a scalpel if you hold it steady enough."

Kane had signed it with a date and nothing else.

Braddock looked up. The room was dead quiet. "What's the mission?" he asked.

The man with the cigarette leaned forward. "Terminate his command. With extreme prejudice."

Braddock didn't answer. He only looked back down at the photo of Kane standing beside the skull altar, silent as the grave behind him.

The air conditioner rattled in the wall behind him, coughing out icy breath that didn't match the stink of the room — burnt coffee, paper mold, and cold sweat. Braddock sat hunched forward, elbows on the table, staring at the closed manila folder like it was ticking. The men across from him had shifted. No more conversation. No more footage. Just stillness and the smell of authority. One of them, the one with the graying hair and no name tag, pushed another folder forward. "This is it," he said. "Everything we've got. Coordinates, tribal sightings, fragmentary recon data, and personal writings recovered from intercepted broadcasts."

Braddock pulled the file toward him and opened it. Thin pages flipped under his fingers. Handwritten scrawl, pages photocopied from notebooks, transcribed dictation. Some were barely legible — ink washed, margins torn, radio-static notes like "He is building something" and "Temple near old plantation ruins." But the voice in the writing was cold and clear.

He turned to one sheet with handwriting in thick, steady lines. Kane had written in capital letters:

"I SAW THEIR SOUL… AND IT WAS EMPTY. THEIR FEAR FILLED THE ROOM LIKE ROT. THEY MOVE IN A SYSTEM OF DENIAL. THEY CALL IT COMMAND. I CALL IT COWARDICE."

Another read:

"THEY WANTED ME TO FIGHT A WAR AGAINST GHOSTS. I CHOSE TO BECOME ONE."

Braddock closed the folder. The cold of the room had soaked through his shirt. His fingertips felt numb. His mouth tasted like rust.

“You're to travel upriver,” said the officer with the cigarette. “We’ll insert you with a river patrol unit. Quiet. No front-line noise. Just you and the crew. They don’t need to know what you’re there for.”

Braddock didn’t respond. He looked down at the folder again. The pages inside seemed heavier than they should be.

“You’re authorized for full clearance,” the man continued. “Primary objective is the neutralization of Kane’s command structure. Secondary, if applicable, is Kane himself.”

“‘Terminate with extreme prejudice,’” Braddock said softly, eyes on the blank wall. It wasn’t a question. The phrase had weight. He’d heard it before.

The officer didn’t answer. He just stood, buttoned his coat, and nodded once toward the guard by the door.

Braddock remained seated as the room emptied, folder in his lap, the hum of the air conditioner buzzing behind him like distant insects. He stared down at Kane’s words one last time, then shut the file.

“Empty souls,” he whispered. “Yeah. Sounds familiar.”

The Mekong rolled thick and brown beneath the dock, slow as blood. Heat shimmered off the surface, warping the boats and trees and sky into a single sick blur. The patrol boat was a black shadow at the edge of it all — squat, armored, bristling with gear. Someone had scrawled something in chalk across the hull, now half washed off by river grime. The air smelled of diesel, sweat, and sun-baked algae. A bird cried once and fell silent.

Braddock stepped aboard with his duffel slung over one shoulder, boots clanging against the metal deck. He lit a cigarette without looking around. The heat pressed against his ribs, made his teeth ache.

“Captain Jack Braddock?” The voice came from behind the mounted gun turret. A man in a sweat-darkened cap approached, tall, built like a crowbar, with that stiff, practiced posture you could smell from ten feet. “I’m Chief Frank Malloy. You’re our tag-along.”

Braddock nodded. “Heard I’m cargo with a pulse.”

Malloy didn’t smile. “Long ride upriver, Captain. Don’t get too poetic. We’re hauling fuel and bullshit through God’s toilet.”

Two more men emerged from the open cabin. The first was young, lean, maybe seventeen, with twitchy fingers and wide eyes. He wore sunglasses too big for his face and chewed gum like it owed him money.

“Royce Gibbons,” he said, flipping a lazy salute. “But everyone calls me Clean. 'Cause I keep the barrel clean, and I don’t touch no jungle whores.” He laughed at his own joke, and no one else did.

Behind him came a shorter, wiry man with a chef’s apron tied over his standard-issue. He carried a can of condensed milk and a spoon. His eyes didn’t blink often enough.

“Reed Delano,” he said. “Used to run a sandwich shop in Baton Rouge. They call me Chef. Not because I’m a cook. Because I’m a fucking genius.” He looked at Braddock like he might bite him.

Last to appear was a barefoot figure lounging under the tarp beside a crate of ammo. He wore a ragged tie-dye shirt under his flak vest and had a string of beads around his neck. His hair hung past his shoulders, and he moved like a man underwater. “Eli Parker,” he said slowly. “But the boys call me Sunshine. Mostly 'cause I’m nice.” He laughed — soft, breathy, slightly off. “Also 'cause I don’t shoot unless the moon tells me to.”

Braddock looked at each in turn. He didn’t ask questions. Didn’t shake hands. Just lit another cigarette and leaned against the railing.

Malloy gestured toward the helm. “We push off now. Word is the monsoon’s coming early. That river’s gonna rise and bite.” He turned without waiting for an answer and climbed into the cockpit.

The engine growled to life — a low, wet sound like something buried waking up. The boat shuddered forward, cut loose from the dock, and slipped into the river’s mouth. Around them, the jungle pressed in close. Mosquitos whined. The sun glared down like a punishment. The Mekong swallowed them whole.

The River Opens Its Throat

The trees grew thicker by the hour. Limbs like crooked fingers arched overhead, tangled into black webs that shut out the sun in patches, letting light spill down in watery beams. The Mekong had narrowed now, its banks pressing in like walls, every bend a blind turn, every ripple whispering like something hiding just beneath. The engine’s steady churn was the only sound that felt human. Everything else belonged to the jungle — the shrill calls, the wet sigh of wind through the canopy, the rustle of something moving where no one could see.

Braddock sat under the tarp mid-deck, boots planted wide, Kane’s dossier spread across his lap like a dead thing he kept trying to dissect. Pages were stained, creased, warped by damp air. A photo fluttered in his fingers — Kane, shirtless, smeared with warpaint, standing at the edge of a ruined stone temple, eyes sunken, expression unreadable. Another page held

transcripts from intercepted broadcasts — half-sane sermons scratched into radio waves. Braddock read the lines slowly, lips barely moving.

"The war is not out there," Kane had written. *"The war is the thing in your mouth, the thing behind your eyes. You think it ends when you stop killing. You think it begins when you're given a rifle. But it's older than that. It's a language."*

Braddock scratched his chin, cigarette hanging dead between his teeth. He flipped to another sheet. Lines of math, diagrams of ritual placements. A map hand-drawn with circles and arrows, symbols that didn't match anything official. The word "purification" written six times in the margins. He glanced out at the green blur drifting past. The jungle didn't care what any of them believed. It only took.

Beside him, Sunshine lay on his back, a rolled joint perched behind his ear like a pencil. He was chewing on a string of beads, fingers twitching in slow rhythm to something only he heard. His eyes were half-closed.

"You readin' the gospel again?" he asked without looking over.

Braddock didn't answer.

Sunshine sat up, pulled the joint from behind his ear, and lit it with a match. He puffed twice, held the smoke in, then passed it toward Braddock.

"Loosen your spine, man. This river'll eat your bones otherwise."

Braddock looked at the joint. It hovered there, thin trail of smoke curling toward the fan blades above. He stared too long. His hand twitched once. Then he shook his head and leaned back, exhaling through his nose.

"Later," he muttered.

Sunshine shrugged and took another drag. "Ain't no later on this river," he said.

Braddock closed the folder, pressed the edges flat, and tucked it under his leg. In the distance, a rusted fuel barrel floated past, dented and scorched, slowly turning in the current. Malloy stood at the helm, unmoving. Gibbons polished his rifle for the third time that morning. Chef stood barefoot on the bow, holding a can of peaches and staring at the trees like they'd just whispered something only he heard.

Braddock lit his cigarette, leaned back against the crate behind him, and watched the jungle drift closer.

The base emerged from the mist like a bruise on the edge of the river — rows of sagging tents strung between bamboo stakes and rusted fencing, sandbags piled half-heartedly along the banks, as if they'd once cared about shelling but had forgotten why. Smoke curled

from diesel generators coughing beside stacks of rotting crates. Music bled from somewhere, warbling and warped, maybe a Stones track played through speakers older than the war itself. Two helicopters sat in a clearing like broken insects, stripped for parts, their tails snapped and hanging.

The patrol boat eased in slow, bow nudging the wooden planks of a floating dock lined with empty fuel drums and a crate of spoiled rations. A pair of shirtless GIs sat nearby, playing cards with fingers blackened from grease and insect bites. One looked up at Braddock as they docked, blinked, and went back to his hand without a word.

Malloy cut the engine. “You sure this is a forward base?” he muttered. “Looks more like a slow-motion funeral.”

They tied off. A corporal with one boot and a shotgun slung loose over his back waved them down the planks and into the mud. Braddock stepped ashore, the smell hitting him at once — sweat, wet cloth, rotting food, stale tobacco, and something else beneath it all, something sour and sweet, like meat left too long in the sun.

A short, barrel-shaped officer waited under a camo tarp where a battered desk and two rusted fans sat grinding away at the heat. His uniform was clean but didn’t fit right, and he wore aviators even though the sky was slate gray.

“Captain Braddock,” he said, extending a hand. “Major Harvey Strickland, command in name only.”

Braddock didn’t shake. “We’re pushing upriver. Need clearance through the dead zone. Your patrols still active up there?”

Strickland gave a dry laugh and motioned toward the base with an open hand. “These boys can barely keep their boots on. Last month, we sent a team up past Bu Rha — came back in pieces. One guy walked thirty miles with no tongue. Said the river whispered his name the whole way.”

Braddock didn’t blink. “We have orders.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Strickland said, sitting behind his desk and kicking open a cooler. He offered Braddock a warm can of beer, which was ignored. “But orders don’t grease engines, and they sure as shit don’t feed men. We’ve got a black market fuel line that died last week. Our heli-rigs are out of morphine. You want clearance? Fine. But I need something back.”

Malloy stood behind Braddock, arms crossed. “What kind of payment?”

Strickland popped his can. “Your man Sunshine. Word is he’s holding Soviet pharmaceuticals. Kolokol-something. Some of the boys here are hurting. You hand over a little of the rainbow powder, and I make sure no one blocks your way upstream.”

Braddock glanced back at the dock where Sunshine sat cross-legged near a crate, blowing smoke rings and humming something tuneless. His fingers moved slowly over a plastic case he kept close to his chest.

Braddock turned back to Strickland. “Fine,” he said. “Half a dose.”

Strickland raised his can. “You got yourself a corridor.”

Behind them, the jungle cracked with distant thunder. The sky darkened. Braddock didn’t look up.

The floodlights carved jagged shadows across the clearing, bleaching the dirt white and turning the surrounding jungle into a black wall of silence. Beneath the makeshift canopy strung between mortar crates and metal scaffolding, a stage had been slapped together from plywood and old pallets. The speakers wheezed and spat static before lurching into rhythm — something fast and American, the kind of track that didn’t belong this deep in the war.

Braddock leaned against a rusted oil drum on the edge of the crowd, arms crossed, cigarette glowing near his cheek. The soldiers had already begun to boil. A hundred bodies packed tight, some shirtless, some in flak vests, faces smeared with grease or mud, mouths open, eyes wild. Shouts rose, and boots stomped the ground in hungry rhythm.

Then the girls came out.

Three of them, draped in thin silk, lashes heavy with black paint, smiles painted on like badges. Their movements were jerky, timed to the wrong part of the music, hips swaying too slow or too fast, hands up in the air like they’d been told to reach for heaven and found it wasn’t there. One had a cigarette in her mouth. Another wore dog tags around her thigh. Their eyes didn’t track the men. They looked just past them, at something nobody else could see.

Chef leaned over to Braddock. “That’s not dancing,” he muttered. “That’s a fever dream with a beat.”

The crowd surged closer. Hands reached up. One of the girls laughed — short, sharp, wrong. A bottle flew from the back and shattered against the scaffolding. The music kept playing. Braddock didn’t move. He smoked and watched as the men below howled, shouting names, numbers, anything. Some had flowers. Some had fists.

One of the soldiers jumped the edge of the stage and tried to pull a girl off. She slapped him and stumbled backward. Another man fired a pistol into the air. The shot cracked through the clearing like a whip. The dancers froze. The music stuttered. For a heartbeat, everything held still.

Then the lights flickered.

In the sudden dark, someone screamed. One of the generators coughed and kept running, casting the canopy in yellow half-light. The girls vanished behind a curtain of bodies. Soldiers scrambled, reaching, chasing, drunk on something worse than liquor. It wasn't joy. It was hunger dressed up in fatigue and loneliness.

Braddock saw Sunshine stepping away from the chaos, one hand gripping the wrist of a girl with smeared eyeliner, the other tucked into his vest. Another girl followed him like a stray dog, silent and barefoot. They disappeared behind a tent flap without a word.

A few minutes later, the music cut. Someone unplugged the speakers. The lights went out completely. What was left was shouting and the slap of boots in mud, the flicker of matches, the hollow silence of the jungle waiting just outside the edge of the clearing.

Braddock flicked his cigarette into the dirt and walked back toward the boat. He didn't look behind him.

By midnight, the base had cracked open like a fruit left too long in the sun. What discipline was left had rotted from the inside out. Fires burned low in rusted barrels. Shadows passed between tents like ghosts without names. The kind of darkness that didn't belong to night anymore but to something older, crawling in with the heat and the sweat and the blood of weeks-old wounds that would never heal.

Chef stood near the mess tent, shirt soaked through, his apron tied crooked and stained. His hands shook as he pointed at a medic with a flat face and hollow eyes, each word louder than the last.

"I got nerve damage, you son of a bitch!" Chef shouted. "I told you that two weeks ago! My spine clicks when I bend, my hands go numb in the rain—"

"It's jungle rot," the medic said, chewing gum and leafing through a clipboard. "Get some clean socks and shut the hell up."

Chef grabbed the edge of the table, knocking a tray of iodine bottles to the ground. "I'm not asking for morphine. Just give me the goddamn reds. Or a strip of Benzedrine. You think I'm gonna cook for these animals sober? Look at them!" He pointed out into the dark.

The medic didn't even blink. "I've got a guy with a missing eye and a fever of a hundred and six. Go smoke a cigarette and cry somewhere else."

Chef spat at his boots and stormed off, mumbling to himself, pulling a small bottle from his pocket and draining it dry in three swallows.

Not far off, Clean stood on top of an overturned crate, his rifle slung on his shoulder, laughing loud and fast at a joke no one had made. A drunk private staggered past and bumped into him, spilling his drink across Clean's chest.

Clean shoved him hard, sending him stumbling. “Watch your fucking spine, asshole,” he barked.

The drunk turned, glassy-eyed and grinning, fists halfway raised. “You gonna cry about it, little man?”

Clean took a step forward, eyes wide, hand twitching toward the grip of his sidearm.

A siren wailed from somewhere near the comms tent. A woman screamed behind the infirmary. Braddock watched it all from a folding chair beside a stack of ammo crates, a bottle of Vietnamese whiskey in one hand, a tin cup in the other. His face was still. No tension. No interest. Just that fixed look, as if he’d already seen all this once in a dream and was waiting for the moment it turned worse.

The drink burned but didn’t numb. Nothing did anymore. He raised the cup to his lips and sipped slowly, smoke from a nearby fire drifting across his face.

Chef was pacing now, barefoot, chewing on his knuckle and staring at the jungle. Clean sat back down on the crate, muttering curses, fingers drumming against the steel. Somewhere behind them, a fistfight broke out. Someone shouted for help. Someone else shouted for morphine.

Braddock poured another inch of whiskey and watched. The river was close, humming just behind the tents. He could hear it breathing.

By dawn, the base looked like the aftermath of a bad sermon. Trash lay scattered across the mud, torn uniforms flapped in the low breeze, and two soldiers were passed out under the mess canopy, arms sprawled like corpses, mouths open to the sky. The clouds hung low and heavy, bleeding light without warmth. The jungle steamed. Everything dripped.

The patrol boat pushed off just after sunrise. Malloy stood at the helm, jaw clenched, eyes straight ahead. No one said goodbye. No one waved. The dock slipped away behind them like a sinking memory.

Sunshine sat cross-legged near the bow, head tilted, pupils black and wide as wells. He clutched his beaded necklace tight between both hands, lips moving in silence. His fingers twitched with a rhythm only he could feel. The girl who’d followed him into the tent never reappeared. No one asked.

Reed sat with his boots up on a crate, arms crossed, chewing the same piece of gum for the third hour. His eyes kept darting toward the jungle’s edge, watching the green shift and ripple like something alive was crawling just behind the leaves. The silence on board wasn’t tense. It was hollow — the kind that expands in your chest like water when you’re sinking.

The mist thickened the further they went, clinging to the boat, swirling off the river in coils. Trees hunched down over the banks, dripping with vines, bark slick with moisture. A single bird called once and didn't call again. Insects buzzed like far-off radios tuned just wrong.

Braddock leaned against the stern, cigarette burning low between his fingers. He'd barely spoken since they left the base, just stared into the water as if it might answer something. The folder with Kane's writings sat unopened beside him. He already knew the words.

Reed stood suddenly. "Hey," he muttered, voice sharp. "What the hell is that?"

They all turned as the boat eased past a thick bend in the river. Floating beside them was a severed arm. Pale. Bloated. Torn just above the elbow. The fingers curled slightly, as if they'd died holding something.

No one moved.

The boat passed it slowly, the current barely rocking it, the arm spinning once, then slipping into the reeds like it had never been there.

Malloy kept his hands on the wheel. Clean muttered something under his breath and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. Sunshine didn't look up.

Braddock exhaled smoke. "Keep going," he said.

No one spoke again for hours.

The village rose out of the mist like a forgotten breath, half-swallowed by jungle and time. Thatch-roofed huts leaned at odd angles along the bank, many patched with old ponchos or sheets of rusted tin. Smoke curled from low cookfires, thick and blue. Chickens wandered the mud alleys without purpose. Children watched from doorways, their eyes huge and glassy, unmoving. No laughter. No sound but the churn of the patrol boat easing into the shallows.

Chief Malloy cut the engine and let the river pull them close to shore. Braddock stood near the gun mount, scanning the treeline. No flags. No soldiers. No threat — or none that showed its teeth yet. "This is it?" he asked. No one answered.

A man emerged from one of the huts, thin and bare-chested, eyes sharp under a conical hat. He carried a woven satchel and moved with the kind of calm that didn't need language. Sunshine stepped off the boat before anyone could stop him.

"Friendly," he said, waving a hand like they were on a beach somewhere. He walked barefoot through the mud toward the man, beads jangling, grinning like it was just another market day.

They met near a cooking pot where something oily and white bubbled. The villager spoke first, voice too low to hear. Sunshine answered with a handful of Russian-labeled vials and a blister pack pulled from inside his flak vest. He showed them like playing cards — one with a red cross, another with a Cyrillic stamp in faded blue.

Braddock watched from the boat. “What’s he doing?”

“Trade,” Malloy muttered. “Jungle diplomacy.”

The man looked over the pills, then nodded and reached into his satchel. He pulled out a cloth pouch, untied it, and tipped something into Sunshine’s hand.

Dark capsules. Almost black. Oily. No markings. They gleamed slightly in the light, like beetle shells.

Sunshine held one up to the sky. “Kolokol-1,” he said softly. “Smells like shadows.”

“What the hell is it?” asked Clean.

“Russian dreamshit,” Chef muttered, watching with a sour face. “Used to hear about it from French mercs. Supposed to keep you awake for days. Make your thoughts hear each other.”

Sunshine grinned and tucked the pouch into his vest. He turned and walked back to the boat as if nothing had happened, passing a child with a shaven head and blank stare. The kid held a toy made from bullet casings and string. Braddock watched the exchange, jaw tight.

They refueled from a rusted drum tied to the pier. No one else from the village came forward. Even the animals kept their distance.

By the time the engine growled again and the boat peeled away from shore, the villagers had vanished back into their huts. Only the smoke stayed behind, curling upward into the trees.

The jungle swallowed them five steps in. Sound changed. The air thickened. Nothing moved above a whisper, as if the whole place held its breath. Chef led the way, machete in hand, slicing through wet leaves and creepers with short, angry hacks. His face was dripping with sweat before they'd gone fifty yards. Braddock followed without speaking, slung rifle across his chest, boots sinking into the mulch with each slow step. The fruit trees were somewhere deeper inland — bananas, maybe guava. Sunshine had mentioned them in passing, between snorts of something chemical-colored. “Just past the ridge. Fat as heads.”

The boat was still visible if you looked back right — a slice of black steel bobbing in the water between trunks. But ahead was nothing but green. Layers and layers of it, wet and pulsing, every leaf glistening like meat. Vines wrapped the trees like veins. Branches hung too low, too silent.

Chef muttered to himself as he hacked. “This is bullshit. No patrols, no security, just send the cook and the spook into the devil’s garden to find bananas. Goddamn ridiculous.”

Braddock said nothing.

They found the first cluster near a termite mound the size of a doghouse. Bright yellow fruit, untouched. Chef dropped his machete with a grunt and reached for his pack.

That’s when something shifted.

Not a sound, not even a movement at first — just a pressure. Like the air had bent inward. Braddock felt it in his ribs. Chef straightened, frozen, eyes wide. His hands dropped to his sidearm.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered.

Braddock didn’t answer. He was looking at the trees, unmoving, expression blank. The barrel of his rifle dipped slightly, not raised, not ready.

Chef turned in a slow circle. “There’s something out there.”

Branches rustled. Not wind. No breeze. It came from low — ground level. Something crawling. Stalking. You could feel it behind the bark, in the vines.

“Fuck this,” Chef snapped. He raised his sidearm and fired three blind shots into the trees. The blasts echoed off the trunks, birds burst upward in flurries, monkeys screamed in the canopy. Leaves rained down. Silence snapped back in place like a lid slammed shut.

Braddock still hadn’t moved. He stared into the foliage as if waiting for it to answer. Not fear, not calm — just stillness.

Chef was breathing hard now. Gun still raised. “You saw it, didn’t you?” he hissed.

Braddock’s eyes shifted slowly toward him. “No,” he said. “But it saw you.”

He picked up a banana, tucked it in his pack, and turned back toward the river. Chef stood alone for a few seconds, sweating, pistol trembling in his hand. Then he followed. Neither of them spoke on the way back. The jungle watched.

Night laid itself over the river like a black shroud, thick with the reek of mud, rot, and insects that never stopped singing. The boat drifted slow in the current, the engine cut to conserve fuel, and the jungle pressed in close from both banks — an endless wall of wet green breathing softly in the dark. Only the stars overhead broke the cover, scattered like ash across a cold sky.

Reed sat near the stern, knees pulled to his chest, arms wrapped around them, rocking slightly. His face was turned away, but the sound of him carried in the stillness — short,

muffled gasps, then the long, quiet struggle to stop them. The others pretended not to hear. His shoulders shook anyway. Somewhere out there, back home, there was a woman with a letter unopened, a bedroom untouched. Reed hadn't mentioned her in days.

Clean sat cross-legged on an ammo crate near the turret, grinning like it was all part of a game. He picked up a spent casing, flipped it in his fingers, and said, "You think when we get back they'll give us a parade? I want a big one. Tanks, flags, the works. Maybe a hot dog stand."

No one replied.

He tried again. "I'm serious, man. I'll be the only guy in Harlem with a bronze star and a parasite the size of a mouse in his gut. I'll be a hero. Kids'll ask for my autograph. Dogs'll follow me."

Still nothing.

Clean's smile faltered, then came back too wide. He leaned over toward Chef, who was sharpening a blade with jerky, aggressive strokes. "You ever eat snake, Chef? Like, real snake? Tastes like bad chicken, right?"

Chef didn't look up. "Shut the fuck up, Clean."

Clean leaned back. "Yeah. Me neither."

Braddock sat alone in the cabin, cross-legged on the floor, a battered cassette recorder in his lap. The reel turned with a faint hiss. Kane's voice crackled through the static — soft, calm, even — the kind of tone you'd hear in a sermon or a lullaby, except for what he said.

"They want a clean war. A holy war. Something they can bury in medals and handshakes. But you can't bleach murder. You can only soak in it. Horror is clarity. Horror strips you down to bone and prayer. You either learn to love it, or it breaks you in silence."

Braddock's thumb hovered over the pause button. He didn't press it. He rewound the tape ten seconds and listened again. The words wrapped around him like wire, digging deeper each time. He didn't blink. He didn't move.

Outside, Reed wiped his face on his sleeve. Clean lay back and stared at the stars, muttering to himself. Chef's blade scraped louder. Sunshine slept near the bow with one eye open, breathing through his teeth.

The jungle waited. The boat drifted. Kane's voice whispered through the machine, and Braddock just listened.

The river was almost black, the surface barely rippling as the patrol boat drifted with its engine idling low. The jungle pressed in so close that branches brushed the hull, leaves

tapping metal like fingers testing a lock. Moonlight broke through in thin strips, catching on water, on sweat, on the dull curve of weapons laid ready but unused. No one spoke. Even the insects seemed to have pulled back.

Then a shape detached itself from the dark.

A small wooden boat slid out of the mist, paddled slow and careful. No engine. No lights. Just the soft dip of oars and the faint creak of wet wood. Four figures aboard. Civilians. Thin silhouettes hunched together, heads down. A woman at the front held something wrapped in cloth. A child maybe. Or rice. Or nothing.

“Don’t move,” Malloy whispered, though no one had.

Clean was already standing at the gun mount, shoulders tight, breath fast. “They’re too quiet,” he muttered. “They’re never this quiet.”

“Hold,” Malloy said. “Hold your fire.”

The small boat drew closer. Close enough to see faces now. Eyes wide. Fear plain and unhidden. The woman lifted her head and said something in a language none of them understood. She raised her arm suddenly — too fast, too sharp.

Clean screamed.

The gun roared to life, tearing the night apart. Muzzle flash lit the river in violent bursts. Wood exploded. Bodies snapped backward. The small boat shattered, pieces flipping into the water. Screams cut off mid-breath. Blood spread dark and fast across the surface, mixing with splintered planks and drifting cloth.

It was over in seconds.

Silence crashed back down, heavier than before.

One body moved.

A girl lay half-submerged among the wreckage, coughing, her hands clawing at a floating board. Her face was streaked with blood that wasn’t all hers. She tried to speak but only water came out, a thin, broken sound.

Malloy stared at her. His jaw worked once. “No survivors,” he said quietly.

Clean stood frozen, gun still smoking, eyes glassy. “She moved,” he said. “I didn’t—”

Malloy turned. “Do it.”

The words hung there, simple and final.

No one else moved.

Malloy took the pistol from his belt, stepped to the edge of the boat, and fired once. The girl's body jerked, then went still. The river took her gently, pulling her under with hardly a ripple.

Braddock hadn't spoken. He hadn't shifted his weight. He watched the water close over the last trace of her, watched the blood thin and disappear. His face stayed empty. The jungle resumed its breath.

The boat drifted on.

The stars hung low and dull, smeared across the sky like grease on glass. The river had gone still again, its surface broken only by drifting ash and the occasional sweep of something that never showed its back. The boat moved slow under the weight of its silence, carving a gentle path upriver as if afraid to wake the banks on either side. Jungle branches trailed the water, vines hanging like ropes from above, dripping mist onto the metal deck.

Braddock sat alone at the bow, knees drawn up, cigarette cupped in his palm, smoke curling upward into the dark. His mouth moved constantly, lips barely parting, words coming low and quiet, too soft for the others to hear. They weren't meant for them. Fragments of thought. Or memory. Or names.

"She was reaching for a doll," he muttered, eyes fixed on the water. "Or maybe rice. Maybe it was rice. Could've been anything. Could've been nothing."

The orange glow from his cigarette lit his face in flickers, casting hollow shadows in the lines around his eyes. He sucked the smoke down deep and let it sit there, as if trying to burn something out from the inside.

Behind him, Sunshine crouched near the engine bay with his shirt off and his beads wrapped tight around one wrist. The cloth pouch was open in his lap, three black capsules resting in the crease like bugs waiting to hatch. He worked with slow, careful fingers, slicing one open with the corner of a razor blade. The powder inside was dark, finer than dust.

He tapped a line out onto the flat side of his dog tags, the metal slick with sweat. He held the tags up to his nose, shut one eye, and snorted hard. His head jerked back, eyes rolling, breath caught in his throat for a long, suspended moment.

Then he exhaled, sharp and fast. His shoulders dropped. A smile crept across his lips like something blooming in the wrong season.

"Still here," he whispered. "Still breathing."

His pupils shrank to pinpricks. His skin took on a sheen that looked less like sweat and more like oil. He looked up at the trees, whispering something under his breath.

Braddock hadn't moved.

“Rice,” he said again. “It was just rice.”

The boat drifted through the fog as if the river were deciding whether to keep them. Behind them, the girl’s blood had already disappeared. Ahead, the jungle waited.

The Fire Sermon

Dawn broke without color. Just a slow lifting of darkness into pale gray. The fog had thickened overnight, wrapping the boat in gauze. The air was wet and sour, tasting of mildew and burnt oil. Trees leaned in from both banks, dripping, heavy with vines. The crew moved quietly, their eyes still swollen from sleep, mouths tight. No one had spoken since the girl. No one even dared cough.

Braddock sat near the front, legs crossed, rifle across his lap, eyes scanning the mist. Malloy was at the helm, expression frozen in a mask he hadn’t taken off since the last village. Sunshine had vanished below deck, curled somewhere dark with the Russian powder burning his nerves thin. Chef was boiling instant coffee over a small flame, his hands trembling more than usual.

Clean stood on the port side, leaning against the .50 caliber mount, humming under his breath. The tune wasn’t anything anyone knew — something half-remembered, passed down through dreams. His fingers tapped the barrel, impatient.

The jungle shifted.

Braddock lifted his head, gaze tightening. “Wait,” he said.

Too late.

The world exploded in sound. Gunfire tore out from both banks — harsh, flat cracks mixed with the high whine of automatic bursts. Muzzle flashes lit the green like strobe lights. The boat jolted, metal clanging under impact. Bullets snapped past Braddock’s ear. Something sparked against the turret.

Clean twisted to fire — mouth open, hands flying to his weapon — and then a round punched through his throat.

He didn’t cry out. Just dropped the gun, grabbed his neck with both hands, and fell backward over the side. A splash followed. Red bloomed across the water like ink spreading in milk. For a moment, his hand reached up, fingers twitching above the surface.

Then it vanished.

“Clean!” Chef shouted, scrambling for the edge.

Malloy slammed the throttle forward. The engine roared, the boat surged. Braddock was already returning fire, single, calm shots into the trees. He didn't yell. He didn't blink. Just aimed and pulled, aimed and pulled, watching the shadows on the bank move and then drop.

Rounds screamed overhead. A grenade exploded in the shallows, showering them with mud and leaves. Sunshine stumbled up from below, wide-eyed, face streaked with black powder and dried blood from his nose. He stared at the empty space where Clean had stood.

"Where—?"

"He's gone," Braddock said.

The gunfire began to fade, one side, then the other. The enemy melted back into the jungle like they'd never been there.

Silence returned too fast.

The boat slowed.

Behind them, the water ran red for yards, Clean's blood marking their passage. His rifle floated for a moment before spinning once and sinking.

No one spoke.

The sun pushed through the clouds at last, and all it lit was a bodyless stain.

Malloy grunted once, sharp and low, like an animal startled from sleep. A round tore through his shoulder, spinning him half sideways at the helm. Blood burst dark against his sleeve and sprayed across the instrument panel. He sucked in air through clenched teeth and didn't let go of the wheel. His left arm went slack, hanging useless, but his right hand locked tight, knuckles white, steering the boat straight through the narrowing channel as bullets snapped the water around them.

"I'm good," he growled, though his face had gone gray. "I got it."

Reed didn't hear him. Reed was screaming.

Not words — just sound, raw and broken, pouring out of him as he swung the .50 caliber toward the treeline and squeezed the trigger. The gun thundered, rattling the boat, tearing the air apart. Casings spilled across the deck like brass rain. Reed laughed as he fired, head thrown back, mouth wide, eyes shining with something that wasn't joy. The recoil shoved him backward and forward in a wild rhythm, his boots skidding in blood and water.

"Come on!" he shouted at the jungle. "Come on, you fuckers!"

Trees splintered. Leaves exploded. Somewhere on the bank, something screamed and went quiet. Reed didn't stop. He laughed harder, hysterical, teeth bared, body shaking with each burst like he was being baptized in noise.

Sunshine lay flat on his back near the center of the deck, arms spread wide, helmet gone. Drool slid from the corner of his mouth and pooled on the metal. His eyes were locked on the sky above the canopy, pupils blown wide, unblinking. His chest rose and fell fast, shallow, like he was running in place. He whispered something over and over — a string of soft syllables that didn't belong to any language anyone there knew.

Braddock moved past him without looking down, steady and deliberate, stepping around spent casings and blood. He took the spare rifle and fired short, controlled bursts into the right bank, cutting down movement he barely registered as human shapes. He glanced once at Malloy, saw the blood soaking through the man's shirt, saw the way his jaw trembled as he fought to stay upright.

The ambush thinned, then broke. The gunfire sputtered out. Smoke hung low over the water. Reed finally released the trigger and slumped against the gun, laughing breathless, chest heaving, eyes glassy and unfocused.

The boat kept moving forward, dragged by Malloy's stubborn hands, leaving behind shredded jungle and drifting brass.

The jungle fell behind them like a closing throat, swallowing the echoes of gunfire into its endless green. Smoke clung to the boat in layers, curling into their clothes, their mouths. The sun rose higher, pale and useless, casting long streaks across the muddy current. Flies had found the blood on deck and moved in fast, swarming the metal with a soft, greedy hum.

Malloy leaned against the wheel, his left shoulder soaked in red, the sleeve stiff with dried blood and fresh pus beginning to bubble along the wound's edge. He hadn't spoken in an hour. Sweat clung to his skin like paint, his jaw clenched so tight the tendons bulged with every breath. His hands still gripped the helm, but weaker now, fingers losing their color.

Chef tried to clean the wound earlier with a bottle of rum and a strip of cloth, but Malloy had shoved him away, muttering curses through a clenched mouth. The wound was turning green. It smelled like wet copper and something worse beneath it.

Braddock sat near the stern, barely visible in the shade beneath the canopy, his face half-hidden in smoke and shadow. He hadn't said a word since they'd pulled away from the ambush site. He didn't sleep, didn't eat. Just watched.

Watched Malloy sway.

Watched the trees pass.

Watched the sweat drip off the dying man's nose.

Reed stood in the center of the deck, pacing in tight circles, eyes darting from Malloy to Braddock and back. He hadn't laughed since the gunfire ended. Now his voice cracked with heat and sleep-deprivation, sharp with something deeper.

"You gonna just sit there forever?" he snapped.

Braddock didn't move.

Reed stepped closer, fists clenched. "You think watching him rot makes you a monk or something? That wound's poison. He's shaking like a dog. You know what comes next. And you're just hiding back there like some—"

"Say it," Braddock said.

The word cut through the air like a blade.

Reed flinched but didn't stop. "You're a coward."

Silence. Even the river seemed to still.

Braddock flicked the ash from his cigarette and stared at Reed.

Malloy coughed — a wet, bubbling sound that turned into a groan as his hand slipped from the wheel. The boat drifted, pulling slightly toward the bank. Reed stepped forward, hesitated, then grabbed the helm with both hands and shoved it back toward center.

"He's not steering anymore," he said.

Braddock stood, finally. Walked forward slow, smoke still curling from the corner of his mouth. He looked at Malloy, watched the way his eyelids fluttered, the way he breathed through his teeth.

"I'm not the captain," he said quietly. "I'm the passenger."

"Bullshit," Reed snapped. "You think if you don't touch the wheel, you won't get blamed. You're still heading there. You're just hoping someone else does the hard part first."

Braddock didn't reply.

He turned and walked back into the shade, sat down, and lit another cigarette. The trees watched from both sides. The river pulled them deeper. Behind him, Malloy groaned again and slumped lower against the helm. Reed swore under his breath and took the wheel. No one else moved.

The trees thinned suddenly, opening into a long straight stretch of river where the banks rose higher and closer, the foliage pulled back as if making room for something that needed

to be seen. The boat drifted slow, engine barely murmuring, carried by the current like a body that had already decided where it was going.

Then the smell hit first.

Sweet. Rotting. Heavy. It clung to the air and coated the back of the throat. Chef gagged once and turned away. Reed stiffened at the helm, eyes narrowing.

The bodies came into view one by one.

They were nailed to the trees along the bank, spaced evenly, deliberate. Some upright, arms stretched wide, wrists pinned with rusted spikes. Others hung sideways, heads lolling, legs bound with vine. Skin bloated and split in places, flies nesting in open mouths, eyes long gone. Some wore remnants of uniforms. Others were naked, ribs visible through torn flesh. Symbols had been carved into chests and foreheads — circles, lines, crude spirals darkened with dried blood.

A wall of them. Dozens. Silent. Watching.

Reed slowed the boat without meaning to. “Jesus,” he whispered.

Malloy’s head lolled to one side. His eyes fluttered open just long enough to register the shapes on the shore. A low sound escaped his throat, not a word, not a prayer.

Sunshine crawled up from the floor, dragging himself by the railing, joint clenched between his fingers. He stared at the bodies with a kind of reverence, lips parted, breath shallow. “That’s him,” he said softly. “That’s Kane.”

Braddock stood. He didn’t rush. He stepped forward slowly until he was at the bow, close enough to see the details — the careful placement, the patience it took to do this. The message wasn’t rage. It was instruction.

He reached out without looking. Sunshine handed him the joint.

Braddock hesitated. The smoke curled up into his face, sharp and green. His jaw tightened. Then he took a long drag, deeper than he meant to, held it until his chest burned. When he exhaled, it came out uneven, broken.

His hands trembled.

Not from fear. From recognition.

The boat slid past the last body, the river carrying them forward as the wall receded into the jungle. Behind them, the flies rose and settled again. Ahead, the trees closed back in.

Braddock stayed at the bow, smoke leaking from his lips, eyes fixed forward. He didn’t say Kane’s name. He didn’t need to.

Darkness had fallen thick as tar, the stars veiled behind jungle mist, the air swollen with decay and river heat. The boat sat half-moored against the bank under a cover of overhanging branches, just enough to disappear from the waterline. No fire. No light. Just the hum of insects and the deep, rhythmic slap of water against the hull. Somewhere in the dark, frogs called like old hinges, and the trees whispered with things unseen.

Reed was gone.

Chef had been the first to notice — his boots missing from the rack, his rifle not beside the turret. At first they thought maybe he'd gone off to piss, maybe to smoke. But the rope ladder on the far side of the boat was still swinging.

Sunshine found him fifty yards downriver, wading through thigh-deep water, cradling his sidearm like a child, his eyes wild and glassy. When he saw the flashlight beam he hissed and raised the gun, but it was too late. Braddock was already behind him. The sound of the buttstock connecting with Reed's temple was quick and dull.

Now he lay tied down across the engine cover, wrists bound with belts, ankles knotted with comm wire, chest heaving with fury. His lip was split. His breath came in gasps.

Braddock stood over him, arms crossed, expression flat as stone.

"You think there's a place to run?" Braddock said. "You think you'll make it ten feet past the trees? They'll strip you down and write poems in your skin."

Reed spat blood and tried to rise. The cords held him.

"You don't know anything," he snarled. "You're just waiting to die, same as the rest of us."

Braddock stepped forward. His hand moved fast — one sharp backhand that cracked across Reed's jaw, dropping his head against the metal with a thud. Silence followed, deep and absolute.

"No one gets out," Braddock said, voice low. "You understand that?"

Reed didn't answer. His breath hissed through clenched teeth.

Braddock leaned closer. "We're all already dead. Just some of us are slower to notice."

Sunshine crouched nearby, watching with unreadable eyes. Chef stood further back, arms folded, jaw tight, saying nothing.

At the helm, Malloy slumped deeper into the seat. His shirt was soaked through with dark sweat, and the bandage on his shoulder had turned black. Flesh beneath had bubbled and split. His breath came in soft, wet gurgles now, his eyes half-closed, lashes twitching with fever. No one tended to him anymore. Not out of cruelty — just certainty.

The river stayed silent. The jungle waited. And no one slept.

The Threshold

The river narrowed again, as if recoiling from what lay ahead. Trees leaned in low, their branches hanging like arms over the water, thick with moss and webs that shimmered in the fading light. The jungle had gone strangely quiet — no birdcalls, no monkeys, not even the insects that had screamed every night since the first stretch of the journey. Only the throb of the engine remained, and even that seemed distant, muffled like a heartbeat beneath skin.

Sunshine stood near the bow, eyes glassy, face hollowed out, mumbling softly in the voice of someone not speaking to anyone real. His shirt clung to his back in wet patches, and his fingers twitched against the railing. He stared forward without blinking.

“There,” he said.

Braddock rose from his seat and stepped beside him. The others followed, silent, drawn forward by instinct or inertia. Even Malloy, half-delirious, lifted his head to look.

At first it was just a shape. Then the mist parted, and the outpost appeared — a crumbling French colonial estate strangled by vines and tree roots, its once-white walls stained green and brown, the windows black hollows. A collapsed wing stretched out toward the river like a dead limb. Flame-lit torches burned in crooked holders along the edge of the ruined terrace. Smoke curled into the trees. Above it all, the jungle loomed — not retreating, just watching.

Drums began at dusk.

Not music. Not rhythm. Just slow, uneven thuds from somewhere within the estate, echoing across the water like a heartbeat with no body. They rose and fell without pattern, without purpose, like the jungle itself was remembering something and pounding on its chest.

No sentries appeared. No warnings. The estate just sat there, lit in firelight, waiting.

The boat drifted closer, moving under its own momentum. No one steered now.

Chef crouched near the turret, whispering a prayer he didn’t remember learning. Reed sat against the hull, bound at the ankles but no longer struggling, eyes locked on the torches as if they might blink.

Malloy slumped back, lips pale, his breathing shallow, the smell of rot curling off his wound like something born.

Braddock didn't speak. His face was calm. In his hand, Kane's tape recorder — rewound, ready. He slipped the headphones over his ears and listened.

As the firelight grew, Kane's voice crackled in the wire: "*At the edge of the map, language dies. What you call madness, I call vision. What you call horror... I call home*."

Braddock looked up.

The outpost burned like a shrine to something forgotten. And still, the drums continued.

Malloy died just after midnight, slumped in his seat, eyes half-open, mouth slightly parted as if he'd meant to say something and forgot the words. No final breath. No twitch. Just a long, drawn-out stillness that didn't fade — it spread. His skin had gone the color of wax. The wound in his shoulder had burst open hours earlier, seeping thick, yellow pus that soaked through his shirt and pooled beneath him. By the end, his breath had sounded like water moving through mud.

Braddock was the one who checked. Two fingers to the neck, a moment of silence. Then he stepped back and said nothing.

No words. No prayer. No goodbyes.

He and Chef lifted the body without ceremony. The others watched. No one offered help. Malloy's boots scraped against the deck as they carried him to the edge. Braddock tilted the body over the side and let go. The river took it like it had been waiting — no splash, no ripple, just the slow, silent sinking of a man who never screamed once.

Reed stood at the stern, shaking. He didn't look at Braddock. Didn't look at the water. His hands clenched and unclenched as his shoulders began to shake. First quiet. Then louder. A sob tore free — raw and sudden — and he turned away, covering his face with both hands. He slid down to the deck and pressed himself into the corner, knees tight to his chest.

"He was the last one keeping us pointed forward," he choked. "We're ghosts now. We're fucking ghosts."

Braddock didn't answer. He lit a cigarette and stared at the black water, the smoke curling into the night.

Sunshine began to sing.

It started low, barely more than a whisper. A tune that might've been a lullaby once, or a hymn passed around orphanages and jungle churches. The melody wandered. His voice cracked in places, but he didn't stop. The words were nonsense in parts — or maybe not in English — but they held something deep and bitter in them, like soil packed around bones.

“Down in the river, down in the black,
Mother can’t find me, won’t bring me back...
Flies on my eyelids, stone in my mouth,
Bury me quiet when the sun heads south…”

He kept going, soft and strange, rocking slightly with each verse.

No one told him to stop.

The boat drifted onward under torchlight, past the roots of the jungle, past reason, past maps, leaving the captain behind in the black water.

The estate emerged from the trees like something remembered wrong — not built, but dreamt and then forgotten. Vines climbed its columns in thick, patient coils, wrapping around the cracked balustrades and choking the gargoyle faces carved into its stone. Tall windows flickered with candlelight behind soot-dark glass. A bell hung crooked in a tower above, long silent. And yet, music.

Soft piano drifted through the thick air — not a recording, but live, notes struck with delicate hands. The sound of civility smuggled into a place that had long forgotten it. As the boat creaked into the old dock, two figures waited at the landing, still and proper in the flickering torchlight. One was a man in a white linen suit, crisp despite the heat, silver hair combed neatly. The other was a woman in a blood-red dress that shimmered at the sleeves, her gloved hands folded in front of her like she had waited there every night for ten years.

Braddock and Reed stepped off the boat in silence, rifles slung but untouched. Neither had spoken since Malloy’s body vanished into the river. They walked up the stone steps together, boots echoing in the ancient courtyard. Neither the man nor the woman spoke until they reached the archway.

“You’ll dine with us,” the man said, his voice soft, touched with a European accent dulled by time. “You’re guests now. War doesn’t pass through here anymore. Not unless we invite it.”

The woman smiled. “You must be starving.”

Inside, the house held back time with cracked dignity. The floor was black-and-white tile, some missing, others covered by Turkish rugs faded to earth tones. A chandelier hung overhead, its glass dust-filmed but glowing with dozens of beeswax candles. The walls were lined with oil paintings — portraits of mustachioed generals and hunting dogs, all staring outward with bored indifference. Ceiling fans spun above, slower than they should, their motors whining softly like old insects.

They were led through a sitting room where three guests waited, all dressed as if the Empire had never fallen. One man wore a pinstriped three-piece suit, complete with pocket watch. Another, shirtless beneath a silk smoking jacket, held a long cigarette holder and a glass of

pale green liquor. A third sat stiffly in a wingback chair, white gloves resting on his lap, eyes never leaving the fire.

The servant — a wiry, mute man in a waistcoat and trousers worn to thread — appeared with a tray. Champagne. Silver bowls filled with pomegranate seeds, salted pistachios, figs swimming in wine.

“Sit,” the woman said. “We rarely get Americans. So vivid. So… urgent.”

Braddock didn’t sit at first. He scanned the room with his eyes, then accepted a glass of wine, heavy and dark, almost black. Reed hesitated before he took his. The liquid inside shimmered faintly in the candlelight, thick as syrup.

The husband sat at the head of the table, unfolding a linen napkin across his knees.

“Do you know what we used to call this country?” he asked, eyes on no one. “Terre d’oublie. The land that forgets. It forgets names. Flags. Armies. And men. But it remembers appetite. Always appetite.”

Dinner was being brought in now. Steam rose from silver platters carried by the servant’s shaking hands. The smell was rich — meats and spices and something darker underneath.

The jungle waited just beyond the shuttered windows, pressing against the walls. Inside, the air tasted like perfume and rot.

Dinner continued beneath the old chandelier, its wax drips piling onto silver trays below like stalactites of forgotten evenings. Reed sat slouched at the long table, a full glass in front of him, his uniform stained, face slack with wine and fatigue. Across from him, the man in the smoking jacket leaned in, pouring champagne with a steady hand and talking without pause, words curling like smoke into the air — something about Algeria, or perhaps Egypt, or just the illusion of borders in places men only visit to lose themselves. The suited man chimed in now and then with laughter that didn’t touch his eyes.

The Frenchman at the head of the table listened but didn’t speak much anymore. He swirled his glass gently, his face lit from below by candelabra, casting long shadows up into the hollows of his cheeks. Every so often, he glanced toward the double doors at the far end of the hall, as if he were waiting for the wine to say something unexpected.

Braddock had risen quietly minutes earlier, under pretense of needing air. The woman followed. No one had remarked on it. The servant watched with eyes that saw everything and understood too much.

Upstairs, the air was thicker — quieter — as if the house itself had retreated from the world. The hallway carpets were threadbare, soft underfoot. The walls were lined with portraits in oval frames, faces turned away from the viewer as if ashamed to be remembered.

She led him into a room with high windows and mosquito netting drawn down from the ceiling like a bridal veil. The bed was colonial-era mahogany, carved with vines and lions, the posts draped with sheer white curtains. Lamps flickered on side tables. A mirror hung on the far wall, old enough to have forgotten its clarity. In it, their movements were blurred — not reflections, but impressions.

Her dress slid off like silk spilling from a wound. Braddock didn't speak. His hands moved slowly, not out of passion but something closer to reverence, or disbelief. She kissed him hard, her mouth wine-sweet and hungry, her breath catching in a rhythm that matched the jungle drums outside, still pulsing faintly through the floor.

Below them, Reed laughed at something that wasn't a joke. He raised another glass and knocked it back, ignoring the bitter edge. The suited man toasted with him.

"To the end of roads," the man said. "And to the beauty found at the borders."

Reed nodded, eyes glazed, not hearing the words but agreeing anyway.

Upstairs, the woman whispered into Braddock's ear as she pulled him down into the bed. Her fingers dug into his back. "They all come through here," she said. "All of them. But none of them ever leave the same."

The ceiling fan spun slowly overhead. The shadows of the blades cut across the bed in slow-motion, like a dream slicing itself into pieces.

Somewhere near the end of the third bottle of champagne, someone wound up the old phonograph in the sitting room, its horn-shaped speaker trembling slightly as the needle caught the groove. A soft crackle came first, like rain on dry leaves — then music, slow and ghostly. The voice of Lucienne Boyer drifted into the room, singing *"Parlez-moi d'amour"* in that fragile, silken way that only survived on records forgotten in trunks. The song filled the air like perfume, drifting through open doors and across worn rugs, stirring the curtains and the shadows in equal measure.

The wife reappeared in a deep green gown that swept the floor, her hair pinned high with silver combs. She moved as though she had never stopped moving. The female servant, younger than she had seemed at first glance, wore a faded corset and long gloves, and laughed softly behind a lace fan as she offered her hand to Reed.

The men in suits smoked fat cigars trimmed with gold foil, their faces lost behind the smoke and the glass of cognac they nursed like sacred fire. One of them played at conducting the phonograph with the stem of his pipe, swaying in place, humming with the melody. The air had taken on a heavy, perfumed weight — of lilies, dust, and sweat.

Braddock, hair damp and collar open, let the Frenchwoman pull him into the parlor where she moved with practiced grace, her heels clicking on the tile. They danced slowly, his boots awkward against her slippered steps. She didn't mind. Her eyes never left his. Not once.

Reed stumbled through a half-dance with the servant girl, who laughed and pulled him gently into rhythm. They turned circles beneath the sagging chandelier, its crystals catching the candlelight in brief flares, like moments from another time blinking into life.

Paintings on the wall seemed to shift slightly in the low light. A large mirror in the hallway reflected the room as it might've looked a hundred years ago — men in military sashes, women in gowns embroidered with gold thread, a servant pouring champagne with perfect posture, as though nothing outside had ever changed.

Thunder rumbled faintly beyond the windows. Or maybe it was drums again.

Eventually, the record ran to silence, and no one reset it.

Braddock and Reed stood near the great double doors. Their packs were slung over their shoulders again, boots laced, rifles resting on their backs. The magic of the house hadn't broken — but it had passed. They had seen too much to stay.

The Frenchman stood at the hearth, watching with quiet eyes. The guests nodded once, as if approving of something inevitable. Reed gave the servant a kiss on the hand that surprised even him. She smiled sadly.

The wife stepped forward, eyes fixed on Braddock. Her voice trembled with something soft and desperate.

"Stay," she said. "This house has room. We remember men like you."

Braddock met her gaze but didn't answer. Instead, he touched her fingers briefly, as if to say goodbye without the weight of a word, and turned toward the door.

As they walked back through the overgrown courtyard, the music from the phonograph began again — a faint, warbled refrain of the same song, as if the machine had remembered on its own.

Down by the river, the boat waited, half-submerged in fog. The jungle stirred softly as they boarded, the illusion of civility left behind like a coat folded neatly in the dark.

The boat moved slow as breath through the morning fog, its hull kissing the river in long, whispering strokes. The jungle had changed again. Trees leaned closer than before, hunched and gnarled, their roots gripping the banks like claws. The mist clung low to the water, thick and sour, seeping into every seam of the boat. It tasted metallic, like old blood and engine grease.

Braddock sat at the bow, hands resting on the rail, eyes fixed forward. His skin was blotched red with mosquito bites. They swarmed his neck, crawled across his knuckles, buzzed against his ears without pause. He didn't flinch. Reed, behind him, was less composed. He slapped at his arms, his face, cursed through clenched teeth as flies crawled into his collar, into the hollows of his ears, biting his wrists and ankles until he bled.

"I swear they're chewing through the bone," he muttered, his voice hoarse from heat and hangover.

"Let them," Braddock said. "They'll get full before we do."

Two hours passed like that. No conversation. No sound but the growl of the boat and the living hum of insects carving through flesh. Even the jungle had quieted, as though it knew something had arrived. The river narrowed one final time, bending around a great outcrop of stone and vine.

That's where they appeared.

Four men, barefoot and shirtless, covered in ash and jungle paint, stepped out of the trees and waved long staffs wrapped in red cloth. One held a flare. Another had a necklace of ears. None of them spoke.

Braddock raised a hand and cut the engine. The boat drifted until it touched a small dock of lashed bamboo. No weapons were drawn on either side. The silence between them wasn't tension — it was ritual. Reed stood, hesitating. Braddock had already slung his pack and stepped onto the dock.

The second his boot touched land, something shifted.

Not in sound, or light — but underneath. As if the ground breathed in and pulled something out of him. Gravity bent slightly. The trees swayed though there was no wind. The earth here felt older. Too old. Not ancient like a ruin. Older than names. Older than language.

Braddock stood still, eyes on the painted men, who turned without speaking and motioned inland. He didn't look back at Reed. He didn't need to.

They followed. The jungle closed behind them, sealing the path with branches and green. The boat rocked gently at the dock, forgotten. The river was behind them now.

The path wound through dense undergrowth until it opened at the base of the old estate — not the one they'd left behind, but another, half-buried in the jungle's mouth, its roof collapsed, windows devoured by vines. This place hadn't hosted dinners in decades. The stone steps were cracked and overgrown, the columns black with mildew, carved reliefs worn down into leering, faceless gods. Smoke curled from unseen fires. The air burned faintly with rot and incense.

Nearby, just beyond a curtain of hanging roots, an ancient temple slouched against the slope — low and heavy, its stone flanks cloaked in moss. Giant heads of forgotten kings watched from the corners, their mouths sealed, their eyes blank with age. Cracked pillars rose like broken fingers from the earth, each etched with serpents and sun-wheels worn smooth by centuries of rain. A stairway vanished into the dark beneath the temple's overhang, its entrance choked with mud and vines. Whatever gods had ruled here no longer spoke, but the ground still remembered them.

Braddock stepped through the archway into the main hall.

Bodies hung from iron hooks embedded in the ceiling beams, some upside down, some by the arms. Most were headless, torsos stripped of insignia, skin marked with ritual carvings — not letters, but spirals and shapes, drawn into the flesh like scripture meant to be read only in silence. Blood had dried in long brown drips down the pillars. In the corners of the hall, small altars made of bone and shattered helmets glowed with candlelight.

The floor was slick with mud and soot. In the center stood a circle of statues, crudely shaped from clay and ash. Their faces were monstrous, all teeth and hollow eyes, but some wore fragments of American dog tags around their necks. One had a grenade lodged in its mouth like a tongue. The firelight made the statues seem to breathe, casting shadows that bent and stretched across the walls like figures caught mid-prayer.

Kane's men lined the walls, shirtless, painted, faces unreadable beneath layers of soot and dried blood. Some knelt. Some bowed. Not out of obedience. Not as greeting. It was something else — recognition, maybe. Or expectation.

Braddock walked slowly across the chamber. Reed stood just behind him, frozen halfway between awe and revulsion. His boots stuck in the muck with every step.

The painted men didn't stop them. They watched as if waiting for something already known to them.

One of the kneeling figures lifted his head, eyes burning red in the fire's flicker. He spoke in a low, cracked voice.

"He knew you'd come."

Braddock didn't respond. He looked up at the rafters where the bodies swayed in a rhythm too slow to be wind.

Something was moving above them.

The estate groaned under its own weight.

Behind Braddock, Reed whispered, "Where the hell are we?"

Braddock stepped further into the chamber. His hand brushed the side of one statue — warm, soft with rot. A painted man followed silently behind, scattering flower petals into the muddy footprints they left behind.

Far above, the drums started again. Slow. Steady.

They were not welcome.

They were expected.

They brought Braddock alone, leading him down a long corridor lit only by guttering candles jammed into cracks in the walls. The flames flickered and stuttered, throwing crooked shadows across faded murals — French officers in pith helmets hunting tigers, women in lace dresses sipping absinthe beneath parasols, their faces half-erased by moss and time. The hallway sloped downward, into stone and soil, each step cooler than the last.

At the end, an arched doorway opened into a wide chamber with no furniture. The walls were bare brick, blackened with soot, the ceiling lost in shadow. Dozens of candles circled the center of the room, their light pooling like blood around the floor. In the middle sat Kane.

He was cross-legged on a woven mat, bare-chested, his ribs sharp, his skin painted with ash. His hair hung long and wet, plastered to his temples. A necklace of spent rifle casings coiled around his neck like a serpent. His eyes were hidden in shadow, lit only when the candles flared just right. He looked up when Braddock entered — not surprised, not welcoming. Just present.

Braddock didn't speak. He took two steps in and stopped. The candlelight licked at the edges of his boots. The heat in the room was thick and pulsing, like standing inside the heart of something dying slowly.

"You were sent to kill me," Kane said. His voice was soft, even. It didn't echo — it settled. "But you're already dead."

Braddock stared. The air between them held weight. No movement. No noise from outside. The world had narrowed to this one room, this one voice.

"I read your file," Kane continued. "Decorated. Respected. Broken. They send the broken ones. The ones who don't flinch anymore. The ones who don't dream."

Braddock shifted his weight, eyes scanning the room's edges — not for escape, but for signs of ambush. There were none. Just dust and fire and a man who should have died years ago.

"They told you I'd gone mad," Kane said. "That I abandoned my post. That I rule this place like a god. They never told you I was right."

He leaned forward slightly, the candlelight cutting across the angles of his face — cheekbones sharp, lips cracked, eyes sunken but shining with something behind them. Not madness. Not clarity. Something harder to name.

Braddock opened his mouth, then closed it. He stepped into the ring of candles, the wax sticking to his boots.

Kane smiled, slow and tired.

“They don’t care about the war,” he said. “They care about silence. I made noise.”

Braddock stared at him for a long time. Then he sat down across from Kane, the two of them mirrored in flame.

Outside, the drums were silent.

For now.

The Rot of Men

The sun never seemed to rise fully here. Light filtered through the canopy like smoke, green and low, painting everything in the shade of bruises. Kane walked barefoot through the mud, and Braddock followed, wordless. Around them, the compound moved with a rhythm outside time — a broken ballet of ritual and blood.

They passed a courtyard where three prisoners knelt with burlap sacks over their heads. Painted men stood behind them with machetes already raised. Kane didn’t pause. Neither did Braddock. Behind them, the sound of metal through flesh, short and wet, was followed by the heavy thud of falling bodies. No one cried out. No one cheered. The chanting began immediately — low, nasal voices repeating a phrase Braddock couldn’t decipher, not a language, more like a sound the jungle had taught them.

The smell was worse than any battlefield.

“This place knows only honesty,” Kane said as he walked. “No medals. No euphemisms. Just rot and rebirth. That’s what you came for, isn’t it?”

They turned a corner into what might once have been a chapel. Now it was open to the sky, the roof long gone, tree roots invading the walls. Dozens of figures sat cross-legged in a circle around a fire burning low with purple smoke. A thick incense hung in the air, sharp as citrus and oil. At the center, a bowl passed hand to hand — something thick and black inside, like blood and ink mixed with ash.

Sunshine was among them.

His face was painted white with a stripe of red running from brow to chin. His pupils were huge, almost swallowing the color of his eyes. He swayed gently to a beat no one else seemed to hear. As Braddock passed, Sunshine raised his hand in greeting — slow, deliberate, as if underwater.

“You’ve got to let it all melt, Jack,” he said, voice syrupy. “Only way to see what’s underneath.”

Kane smiled faintly. “He came to me willingly. Like most do.”

Braddock turned, but Reed was no longer behind him. Somewhere between the courtyard and the chapel, he had vanished. No sound. No sign. Just gone.

“Where is he?” Braddock asked.

“He’s gone where he needed to,” Kane said. “You’ll understand soon.”

Braddock didn’t speak again. He followed as Kane walked deeper into the compound. The ground grew softer underfoot, like it had absorbed too much blood over the years. Insects buzzed around piles of bones near half-buried cages. Chanting echoed from every direction, bouncing off stone and tree, coming from mouths and holes in the ground alike.

The compound pulsed like a living thing, and Braddock’s breath began to slow without him noticing. His hands hung loose at his sides. His rifle felt heavier than it had hours before, like it belonged to someone else.

From the chapel, someone began to laugh. Then sob. Then laugh again.

The trees swayed.

And the sun never came.

Night came without ceremony. One moment, the sky was bruised green; the next, it vanished. The compound didn’t shift with it — the chanting continued, the fires stayed lit. Time bled out like everything else. Inside the old refectory, Kane sat atop a stone dais draped in flags, American and Vietnamese, both shredded, their colors melted by rain and rot. Candles lit the space in pale circles, flickering against the damp walls, and smoke from the bone-pits curled through the gaps in the stone.

Braddock sat on a carved stool across from him, bare-chested, eyes red, arms streaked with mosquito welts and black smears of ash. In his hand, a wooden bowl shaped from a human skull, its inner rim stained dark with years of use.

Kane spoke in that same calm, unraveling voice, not sermonizing, not instructing — just revealing.

“War isn’t death,” he said. “Death is simple. Death is easy. You’ve met death.”

Braddock didn't respond. The bowl hovered near his lips.

Kane leaned forward, his shadow growing across the flag.

"What you fear," he whispered, "is what war shows you. What's under the noise. You don't fear dying. You fear seeing yourself."

The silence between them was thick, electric. Outside, the chanting faded into a slow drumbeat, deep and arrhythmic, like a sickened heart.

Braddock drank.

The liquid was thick, sour, with a bite that scorched the tongue and stung the throat. Blood, fermented with roots and herbs, the texture more mud than wine. His stomach recoiled, but he didn't stop. Kane watched without blinking.

When the bowl was empty, Braddock set it down on the stone floor. His hands trembled, not with fear, but with a slow, buzzing pulse that began behind his teeth and spread through his bones. The room shifted — not visibly, but perceptibly — the corners deepened, the candlelight took on a lean, the flags seemed to ripple though no wind blew.

Kane stood and stepped closer.

"You've carried their orders in your mouth," he said. "Now carry mine in your blood."

Braddock looked up at him, breathing heavy. The world felt tilted. Not broken. Just… angled.

Outside, something howled once. Then laughter. Or both.

The drums continued. The air thickened. The jungle leaned closer.

Braddock didn't remember walking from the refectory. He only knew that now he was outside, barefoot, feet sinking into mud, ash clinging to his skin like a second layer of flesh. The compound drifted around him in fragments — trees leaning sideways like drunken sentries, the stone pillars of the estate tilting inward, torches melting into halos. Sounds came in waves: chanting, crying, drums that started and stopped mid-beat. He had lost track of which hour belonged to what.

He was watching himself from above.

There — that was him, wasn't it? Moving slow across the courtyard, shoulders hunched, mouth slightly open. His eyes were blank. Something dripped from his fingers. Insects crawled in and out of his hair, and he didn't feel them. He watched himself turn toward a wall of skulls and lean close, as if listening. Then the vision tilted, and he was back inside himself, barefoot on the stone path, breathing smoke.

Sunshine appeared out of the mist, smiling wide, his pupils vast and black.

“You’re open now,” he said. “Good. That’s good. You’re almost through.”

He offered Braddock a crude roll of twisted leaves, bound with thread and coated in something dark and shining. Braddock took it without speaking. When the flame touched the tip, the smoke hit hard — thick, wet, stinking of earth and blood and citrus rot. It clawed down his throat and bloomed behind his eyes.

Then came the cities.

He saw fire running down glass towers, the streets of some impossible future clogged with ash-covered corpses. Soldiers in old uniforms waded through oceans of flame, laughing. A city bled from its seams, not destroyed by bombs, but consumed from within, by joy, by hunger, by the grinning mouths of its children. Above it all, Kane stood — naked, crowned in vines and bone, arms stretched wide. His face was painted gold, and from his mouth came not words, but smoke, pouring endlessly into the burning sky.

Braddock fell forward into the mud.

The sky swirled. The trees pulsed. The stone beneath him breathed in slow, tidal rhythms.

He lay on his back now, staring up through the moving canopy. Faces passed overhead — not real ones, but memory-worn fragments. Men he’d killed. Men he hadn’t. His mother, maybe. Or someone like her.

From somewhere deep in the estate, a voice echoed.

“You see it now,” Kane said. “We aren’t lost. We’ve arrived.”

Braddock closed his eyes and drifted into the space between heartbeat and breath, where time ceased and only the rot remained.

Rain fell, thick and steady, dripping from the leaves like sweat from a fever. The courtyard steamed under it, the heat trapped beneath stone and mud, heavy as a blanket soaked in blood. Braddock stood barefoot in the center, mud caked to his knees, shirtless, eyes vacant. His rifle was gone. He no longer remembered when he’d set it down. In his hand now was a machete — curved, stained, its handle wrapped in black cloth worn slick from use.

The compound had gathered in a wide circle around him. Painted men. Hollow-eyed acolytes. Sunshine knelt by the fire, rocking gently and humming some slow, tuneless melody. Smoke from the herbal pits drifted over the watchers, clinging to their skin like oil. No one blinked. No one spoke.

Kane stood above them on the broken stone steps, flanked by two figures in bone masks, hands folded before them. His voice carried like thunder under silk.

“Every great vision requires fire. Every awakening needs a sacrifice.”

Two men emerged from the shadows, dragging between them a bound American — young, uniform in tatters, one eye swollen shut. His dog tags dangled limp and muddy. He stumbled as they pushed him forward, collapsing to his knees at Braddock’s feet. The captive looked up, blood streaking his teeth, confusion giving way to recognition.

“Jesus… you’re— you’re American,” he gasped. “Help me. Please.”

Braddock stared down, unmoving. The rain made rivers down his face. The machete in his hand pulsed with memory. His breath came slow, his muscles slack but ready.

Kane stepped closer.

“You hesitate because you still believe in meaning,” he said softly. “But meaning is a story they tell you before the killing starts.”

The captive wept now, shoulders shaking, voice hoarse with panic.

“I got separated from my unit. I’m not… I’m not one of them. I didn’t do anything.”

No one moved to help him.

Braddock raised the blade.

The circle of figures closed in with their silence, their stillness. The jungle around them held its breath.

The captive whispered something — maybe a prayer, maybe just his name — before Braddock brought the blade down.

It was not clean. It rarely is. The body spasmed, jerking sideways into the mud. Blood sprayed across Braddock’s chest and face, warm and immediate. He didn’t blink.

Kane nodded once.

The circle broke into slow, deep chanting, the sound like a tide pulling back over stone. Sunshine laughed softly behind his hands. Braddock dropped the blade into the mud and stared at the body without expression. He waited for guilt, for sickness, for meaning.

None came.

The rain fell harder, washing blood into the soil.

Sleep took Braddock like drowning. There was no descent, no weightless drift — just sudden submersion. One moment he sat in the mud, blood drying on his chest, the next he was somewhere else entirely, vast and dark, under skies that bent the stars into spirals. The

earth beneath him bled. Not water. Not lava. Blood — thick and luminous, running down mountains like it had been waiting beneath the stone for centuries.

He stood ankle-deep in it, watching the peaks weep. From the horizon came rivers — not of water, but of teeth. They clattered together in massive white floods, tumbling through valleys, grinding forests to dust. Faces bloomed from the ground, mouths wide and silent, their eyes wet with worms. Arms reached from the sky. Wings grew from towers. In the distance, he saw Kane standing on a monolith of skulls, fire curling from his hands. His body pulsed with light, golden and skeletal, crowned in smoke. His eyes were hollow. His mouth moved, but the words were not sounds — they were shapes that carved themselves into the air.

Braddock tried to speak but had no tongue. He raised his arms and found feathers where his fingers used to be. The world began to fold inward.

He woke gasping in the dark, breath like razors in his throat.

The fire had died to coals. The jungle whispered in the distance. He lay on a bed of woven grass and bone, wrapped in an old military tarp. His mouth was dry, his hands still streaked with blood. He didn't know how long he'd been out.

Kane sat beside him, knees drawn up, smoking something from a hollowed pipe. His eyes reflected the low glow of the embers. He watched Braddock without expression — not with pity, not with pleasure. Just with that same quiet knowing.

"I saw what you see now," he said softly. "It doesn't end. It becomes."

Braddock didn't answer. He stared at the ground.

Kane exhaled slowly. Smoke curled around his face like a veil.

"I will not stop you," he said. "I never could."

He stood, bones cracking, and walked away without looking back.

Braddock lay still in the dark, eyes wide, heart pounding in a rhythm that no longer felt like his own. The jungle pulsed in the distance, and the compound breathed with it, slow and endless.

Behind his eyelids, mountains still bled, and the rivers still howled.

A God Must Fall

The jungle had stilled. No drums. No chanting. Even the insects had gone quiet. Smoke drifted through the compound in thin, trembling lines, hanging low like mist without rain.

The torches had burned out, leaving the air to glow faintly from scattered embers and moonlight filtered through trees that now leaned inward like they had come to watch.

Braddock walked barefoot through the mud, machete in hand. His steps were slow, deliberate, his body coated in dried blood and ash. The blade dragged slightly beside him, catching on stones and roots, leaving a line in the dirt like a wound that refused to close. His face was hollowed, not from hunger, but from something that had eaten its way out of him, leaving only breath and bone behind.

He passed the chapel, now empty. The fire pit smoldered. No acolytes remained. Sunshine was gone — or perhaps had never been real. The painted men no longer stood watch. The compound had folded in on itself like a dying animal, ready for the final cut.

In the center of the estate's ruined inner sanctum, beneath the collapsed roof and broken beams, Kane knelt on the floor.

He wasn't speaking loudly. Just murmuring — breath without voice, words without audience. His head was bowed. His body swayed gently, as though caught in the rhythm of something old and personal. Around him, symbols were drawn in blood and soot, spirals and eyes and things that pulsed in the torchlight though they did not move.

Braddock stepped closer.

The machete hung in his hand like it belonged to someone else. The sweat on his palms made the grip slick, but he didn't notice. He watched Kane kneel there in the dirt, arms at his sides, head lowered like a monk at a ruined altar.

No one emerged from the trees. No voice cried out.

Kane did not turn.

Braddock raised the blade.

Still, the compound held its breath.

The blade rose in Braddock's hand, and for a moment it hung in the air, suspended not by hesitation but by gravity itself, as though the jungle had reached up to hold it, to beg for one last breath. But Braddock brought it down.

The sound was not loud. No scream. Just the wet snap of flesh parting and the muffled gasp of breath forced out from the ribs. The machete sank into Kane's shoulder, then again into his side, again through his chest. He did not resist. He only tilted backward, arms falling open like wings, eyes closed, mouth slack, as if sleep had finally arrived.

Braddock straddled him, both hands on the blade now, slashing down again, again, until Kane's chest was a ruined mass of bone and pulp, his blood rising in thick, warm waves that coated Braddock's arms and dripped from his jaw.

Still, Kane did not cry out.

Only at the end, with blood bubbling on his lips and his chest cracked open, did he speak — barely a whisper, words leaking out like steam.

"The hollow…" he said. A pause, a smile, barely visible through the ruin of his face.

"…the hollow god…"

Then he was gone.

Braddock knelt there, breathing hard, the machete stuck halfway into Kane's side. The jungle did not move. No witnesses emerged from shadow. No hand reached out to bless or condemn.

Only the silence remained.

And in it, Braddock realized no one had ever meant to stop him.

Not Kane. Not the painted men. Not even the jungle.

Braddock stepped from the ruined sanctum into the open air, his arms streaked in blood to the elbows, shirt torn down the back, machete still dripping. Behind him, the corpse of Kane lay twisted in candlelight, the ribs cracked open like a burnt offering. The temple was breathing smoke now, low and steady, as if the estate itself had exhaled at last.

Outside, the compound had gathered.

Dozens stood beneath the trees — acolytes, painted men, silent children draped in jungle vines, even old women with ink-black teeth. They had returned from wherever they had gone, from corners of the estate and deep within the foliage. None approached. None ran. They simply waited.

Braddock stopped at the top of the steps, breathing shallow. The blood on his body had begun to dry, stiffening in dark swirls across his chest and face. His eyes moved across the crowd. No faces he knew. Reed was nowhere. Sunshine was gone. He stood alone now, heart pounding so hard it shook the machete in his hand.

Then, one by one, the heads began to lower.

The tribe bowed.

Not to mourn. Not to protest. But to receive.

Braddock stood motionless as the entire courtyard bent before him, arms crossed, foreheads low. The painted men knelt fully in the mud, pressing their hands to the earth. Even the children followed, eyes lowered, still as stones.

The drums began slowly.

A single beat, deep and wet, like a heartbeat cut in half. Then another. And another.

It rose with the smoke, with the heat, with the silence. A rhythm that did not celebrate, did not grieve. It simply pulsed. Alive. Endless.

Braddock did not speak.

He only stared into the canopy as the leaves above shivered, as if even the sky now bent its neck. The blood on his hands had dried to black. The blade at his side glinted once in the firelight, and then faded.

He did not step down the stairs. He did not return to the boat.

The jungle, the men, the compound — they waited. So did he.

And the drums beat on.

Through the line of kneeling bodies, Sunshine emerged like something born again — no longer laughing, no longer drifting. His face was painted anew, this time in deep ochre and ash, marked with symbols that curved like smoke across his temples. His eyes were clear now. Steady. Whatever softness had once lived in him was gone. He carried a bundle in both hands, cradled like an offering.

A robe — stitched from dark cloth, lined with bones, its hem stained with something older than blood.

He approached without a word, standing before Braddock, and held it out.

Braddock looked at it for a long moment. The machete hung at his side. His hands, still raw, still clotted with gore, reached forward and took the garment. Slowly, deliberately, he stripped off what remained of his shirt, dropped it into the mud, and pulled the robe over his shoulders.

It fit.

The chanting began low, not words, but breath — hundreds of voices drawing in and out in a rhythm that matched the drums. Like lungs shared between bodies. Like the jungle itself was speaking through them.

Braddock turned slowly, the robe settling against his back. His eyes moved past the fire pits, past the shattered stones, past the circle of bowing heads, until they found the river.

It glinted silver in the darkness, narrow and distant, the boat still moored in silence.

He didn't move toward it. Didn't glance at the path. He turned his back to the river. The jungle behind him opened like a mouth, deep and green and alive. The drums rose. The chanting grew louder.

And Braddock, wrapped in the robe of the fallen god, stepped down from the stone.

At dawn, mist rolled low across the compound, curling around the statues and the bone-laced altars, thick as memory. Smoke already drifted from the pyre built in the center of the courtyard — a towering structure of woven bamboo, oil-soaked wood, and dry vines. At its peak lay Kane's body, wrapped in stained canvas, his arms folded across his chest, the machete still buried in his ribs like a scepter.

Braddock stood below, cloaked in the dark robe, its weight grounding him to the soil, the bones stitched into it rattling faintly when he moved. He said nothing as the tribe assembled. The painted men stood on one side, the children and elders on the other. Sunshine knelt before the pyre with a bowl of flame in his hands, its glow painting his face in shifting red.

With a nod, Braddock stepped forward.

He took the bowl from Sunshine, held it before him. The flames flickered hungrily as he moved to the base of the pyre. The silence was absolute. Even the jungle had gone still, as if watching.

Braddock touched the fire to the kindling.

The blaze spread fast, rising up the frame like a scream made of light. Within seconds, it roared — dry vines snapping, canvas curling black, smoke billowing upward. The air filled with the scent of burning hair, cloth, and flesh. Ash lifted like black snow into the early sky.

He stood motionless, staring into the inferno.

Then he lit a stick of incense from the pyre's edge, its end glowing orange, and raised it before his mouth.

In a low, steady voice, he spoke the words Kane had once said.

"We are not the disease. We are the mirror. They see us and cannot bear their own shape."

The incense smoke coiled around him, thin and sharp. His voice did not rise, did not falter.

"Horror is not what they fear. Horror is what they are. We only name it."

He stepped back as the flames consumed what remained.

Ash drifted upward into the canopy, vanishing into the haze above. Some of it clung to his arms, his face, his robe. He didn't wipe it away.

He let it settle.

He stood before the fire until the body was gone, until only the bones cracked and the wood collapsed.

The jungle exhaled.

No Return

Somewhere far downriver, in a concrete bunker filled with fans that stirred only dust and heat, the radio operator at the U.S. forward base repeated the call again.

"Jungle Team Seven, come in. This is Command Base Echo. Do you copy?"

Only static answered.

Behind him, a major leaned over the table, sweat soaking through his undershirt. The transmission log was already three pages deep with unanswered hails. The ink smudged. The coffee had gone cold. He tapped the headset with two fingers.

"Try again."

The operator sighed and clicked the mic. "Jungle Team Seven, this is Echo. Your extraction window is open. Do you copy?"

Still nothing.

But Braddock no longer listened to radios.

He stood now at the top of the moss-covered stairs leading down into the compound — or what remained of it. The bones had been cleared. The altars rebuilt. Flags stripped. Where Kane once sat, Braddock now stood. A new post had been raised — bamboo lashed together, wrapped in red cloth, crowned with the rifle of the soldier he'd killed. Incense burned from small clay bowls around its base.

The followers called him Colonel now.

Col. Braddock.

The rank had been theirs to give. Not from a nation, not from command — from ritual, from fire, from the blood he had spilled under no orders but his own.

He did not shave. He no longer wore boots.

His eyes were dark with smoke and silence, his voice used only when needed.

Sunshine stood at his side most days, watching the tree line with a rifle slung lazily across his back. His hair was longer. His teeth stained from chewing roots and herbs. They rarely spoke, but it wasn't necessary. The silence had become sacred. Reed's fate was never spoken of.

Braddock did not look downriver anymore.

He did not write.

He had no maps.

The jungle had claimed him as it had claimed Kane. But unlike Kane, Braddock did not whisper prophecy. He gave no speeches. He did not pretend to be mad or divine.

He simply remained.

Above him, clouds churned. Somewhere beyond the hills, the sound of distant rotors echoed and faded.

In the command bunker, the major closed the logbook and lit a cigarette with a hand that trembled just slightly.

The war would end, eventually. But not here. Not in this place. Not with him.

The jungle had grown thicker around the compound. Vines now draped across the old French pillars like veins over bone. The river was a rumor — distant, murmuring, forgotten. In the courtyard, the sun never fully cut through the canopy. Light came broken, filtered through layers of green and smoke.

Braddock sat beneath the rebuilt post, the rifle still crowned above him, incense curling around his shoulders like breath. A painted guard knelt before him, head bowed, arms trembling as he offered up a bloody cloth. Braddock took it without expression, wiped the edge of the knife in his lap, and folded the cloth neatly across his knee.

A deserter lay nearby, tied to a post by strips of vine, his face half-pulped, one eye swollen shut, lips broken and oozing. He had tried to leave the night before, slipping into the underbrush with a stolen compass and a pocket of dried food. The scouts had dragged him back before dawn. Now he screamed no more. He wept without sound.

Braddock leaned forward, voice low, hoarse from disuse.

"Where were you going?"

The man whimpered, words caught in spit and blood. "Home."

“There is no home.”

Braddock rose slowly, robe swaying around his legs. He stepped close, crouched, and pressed the blade of the knife against the man’s cheek, not cutting — just weight, just promise.

“You had your chance,” he whispered. “You chose silence. You’ll keep it.”

Behind him, Sunshine sat cross-legged on a raised platform, back straight, his body painted in long vertical lines of black and white. A coil of smoke drifted from the bowl in his lap, and he stared through it as though reading signs only he could see. He nodded once, solemnly, as if granting permission.

Braddock moved the knife down slowly, across the chest, over the stomach.

The man sobbed.

Later, his body would be strung up at the edge of the compound as warning. No speeches. No judgment. Just consequence.

By the north wall, under a twisted banyan, a shallow mound of earth marked the only grave that mattered. A splintered boot stuck out from the soil, laces undone. No name. No ceremony. Just the quiet fact of it.

Reed had been found days after Braddock's ascension — throat slit, belly bloated, ants threading through the sockets of his eyes. No one had seen him die. No one had claimed his body. Braddock had buried it with his own hands, mud up to his elbows, lips shut tight.

Now the grave was covered in leaves. No followers approached it. No one spoke his name. The jungle had taken its due, and Braddock had given it freely.

The throne hall of the jungle temple had once been a ballroom, long ago, in the bones of some colonial fantasy now buried in vines and blood. The ceiling had collapsed in places, letting shafts of green light slant through the high canopy. Ivy climbed the cracked stone walls, feeding off the rot in the mortar. Beneath the broken chandeliers, moss bloomed in great, soft carpets that silenced every footstep.

At the end of the hall, on a dais of scorched stone and rusted iron, Braddock sat.

The throne itself was little more than a chair of twisted rebar and carved jungle wood, animal hides stretched across it, still mottled with dried blood. Behind him, flags of no nation hung limp, shredded and unreadable. At his feet, incense pots smoldered. A monkey skull nestled among the ashes. Birds called in the distance — or maybe they didn’t. Sound in this place obeyed no laws.

To Braddock’s right, resting on a polished slab of black stone, was the skull of Colonel Kane.

Cleaned. Preserved. Crowned with a circle of wire and teeth. Its sockets stared forward, endless and empty.

Braddock's eyes were half-closed, his face unmoving, lips slightly parted. The robe hung heavy around him, dark with years of sweat and rain, stitched with bones now turned yellow. His hands rested on his thighs, veins dark and still. He breathed evenly. Not asleep. Not fully awake. Suspended.

The drums echoed from the outer jungle.

Slow. Certain. Alive.

They beat like blood. Like memory. Like the very roots of the trees had learned to drum from men who could no longer speak. The rhythm threaded through the compound, through the bones of the estate, up the stone stairs and into the hollow of the throne hall.

Followers came and went in silence.

Some knelt. Some burned offerings. None spoke to him. There was no need. He was no longer a man with questions or command. He was part of this place now — the stone and the breath and the stillness.

He did not smile. He did not frown. His eyes were dull with something like peace.

The jungle exhaled — deep, slow, full of heat and old breath. The vines moved against the stone in a shiver. The air thickened with ash and scent.

Outside, the river still wound past like a memory. But no one looked to it.

Not anymore.